3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

TRANSACTIONS

OF THE

NEW YORK ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

SERIES II

VOLUME 7

[title page]

NEW YORK
PUBLISHED BY THE ACADEMY
1945

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

SECTION OF ANTHROPOLOGY

OCTOBER 23, 1944

DOCTOR CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS, École Libre des Hautes Études, New York, N. Y.: *The Social and Psychological Aspect of Chieftainship in a Primitive Tribe: the Nambikuara of Northwestern Mato Grosso.*

000 Few anthropologists would admit today that human groups displaying an extreme primitiveness either in the field of material culture or that of social organization can teach us something about the early stages of the evolution of mankind. Primitiveness in one field often goes on a par with a great sophistication in another, as shown by the Australian refinements concerning kinship. Since these primitive peoples have their own history, it would be a serious mistake to think that it may be discounted because we know nothing of it. The partial similarities which archaeological remains allow us to infer between primitive societies and those of prehistoric man, while they remain sheer hypotheses, do not preclude the tremendous differences which may have existed in fields outside of the archaeologist's reach. The above considerations, which are only a few among many others, have led most anthropologists in recent years to consider each human group as a particular case which should be studied, analyzed and described from the point of view of its uniqueness, without any attempt to use the results for a better understanding of human nature.

However desirable this attitude may have been after the evolutionist orgies, and however fruitful the results obtained, there are many dangers in it which should raise increasing concern. Are we condemned, like new Danaids, to fill endlessly the sieve-like basket of anthropological science; in vain, pouring monographs over monographs without ever being able to collect a substance with a richer and denser value? Fortunately, primitive societies have not to be considered as illusory stages in the evolution of mankind to teach us a truth endowed with a general validity. The fact that they are (at least some of them and all of them in some respect) *simpler* societies than our own does not need to be taken as a proof of their archaism. They still throw light, if not on the history of mankind, at least on some basic forms of activity

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

which are to be found, always and everywhere, as prerequisites for the existence of human society.

The simpler organisms may provide a better field for the study of organic functions than those which exhibit the same functions, although under a more complex form. Simple human groups render the anthropologist the same kind of service without any need of surmising that they represent survivals of older types of organization. Now, to call upon the notion of function in the field of anthropological sciences is no discovery. This notion, first introduced by Durkheim in 1894,[1] has been only too much exploited since then, sometimes in the most abusive way. There are indeed functions of the social life as well as functions of the organic life. But neither in one domain nor in the other does everything correspond to, nor may it be justified by, its functional value. To state the opposite view could lead to only two results: either an anthropological come-back to eighteenth century Providentialism, where culture would play in relation to man the same utopian tutelary part which was attributed to nature by the author of *Paul et Virginie*;[2] or the reducing of the notion of function to a mere tautology—to say, for instance, that the function of the notched lapel on our coats is to gratify our esthetic feeling would be meaningless, since, here, obviously, the feeling results from the custom, and not the contrary. The custom has a history which explains its existence. It does not, under present circumstances, possess any function.

The preceding may appear to be a very ponderous introduction to an address dedicated by its title to the psychological aspects of chieftainship in a small Brazilian tribe. But I do not believe that the data which I am going to present, if considered only as data on chieftainship among a hitherto little known group, would honestly deserve one hour of attention. Similar facts have been recorded many times, either joined or separately. The particular interest offered by the Nambikuara is that they confront us with one of the simplest conceivable forms of social and political organization. Chiefs and chieftainship exist, among all human groups, under very different forms, but it would be vain to assign a special functional value to each of the modali-

[1] In "Les Règles de la Méthode Sociologique": "The function is the correspondence between the considered fact and the general needs of the social organism." p. 117.

[2] In his "Etudes de la Nature" (1784) Bernardin de Saint Pierre suggested that Nature devised melon ribs to make the fruit easier to divide on the family table, and that it made fleas black so that they could more easily be caught on white skin.

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

ties down to their smallest details. There is, undoubtedly, a function in chieftainship. This can, however, be reached only through analysis as the underlying principle of the institution. In other words, the differing structure of the digestive organs in man, ox, fish and clam do not point toward different functions of the digestive system. The function is always and everywhere the same, and can be better studied, and more fully understood where it exists under a simple form—for instance, in a mollusc. Similarly, and as Professor Lowie once wrote, if anthropology is to be considered as a scientific study, its subject matter cannot be individual cultures, but culture taken as a whole; the rôle of individual cultures being to offer, according to their own characteristics, special angles from which the basic functions of culture, although universal in application, can be more easily reached.

This will perhaps help us to eliminate preliminary questions which otherwise could have proved very difficult. Anthropologists in South America and elsewhere have been eagerly debating the question of whether these South American tribes—nomadic, relying mostly on collecting and gathering, with little or no agriculture, little or no pottery, and, in some cases, with no dwelling other than crude shelters—should be considered as truly primitive and as having preserved their exceptionally low cultural level through tarriance, or whether they did not previously possess a higher type of social and material organization and have regressed to a pseudo-archaism under unfavorable circumstances. The Nambikuara are one of those tribes which, along with the Siriono, on the other side of the Guaporé valley, the Cayapo, Bororo, Karaja of central Brazil, the so-called *Gé* of Central and Eastern Brazil, and some others, together form a kernel of primitiveness surrounded, in the West, by the higher tribes of the upper Amazon, the Bolivian plain and the Chaco, and from the Oronoco's to the La Plata's estuaries, by a coastal strip inhabited mostly by the Arawak, Carib and Tupi-Guarani linguistic families. An independent linguistic stock divided into several dialects, the Nambikuara seem to display one of the more backward cultures in South America. At least, some of their bands do not build huts and are wholly ignorant of pottery and, even among the others, these two arts are exceedingly poor. There is no weaving, except for the narrow arm and leg bands which are made of cotton; no dress whatsoever, either for the men or for the women; no sleeping contrivances, such as hammocks or platforms; the natives being used to sleeping on the bare ground without the protection of blankets, mats or hides.

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

Gardening exists only during the rainy season and does not free the Nambikuara from wandering during the seven months of the dry season, looking for wild roots, fruits and seeds, small animals such as lizards, snakes, bats, spiders and grasshoppers and, generally speaking, anything which may prevent them from starving. As a matter of fact, their geographical surroundings, which are located in the northwestern part of the state of Mato Grosso and include the headwaters of the Tapajos, Rio Roosevelt and Rio Gi-Parana, consist of a desolated savanna with few vegetal resources and still less game.

Had I approached my subject from a point of view other than the one outlined above, I could not have avoided a long discussion in South American cultural history, aimed at clearing up this apparent primitiveness, on the question as to whether the survival of early conditions of life in South America is genuine or whether we should consider it as a more recent—although undoubtedly pre-columbian—result of culture clashes and processes of acculturation. Whatever the answer may be, it cannot substantially change our problem: whether tarriant or recessive, the Nambikuara society functions, in the present, as one of the simplest forms of human society to be conceived. We shall not seek information from the particular history which kept them in their exceptionally crude organization or brought them back to it. We shall only look at the experiment in social anthropology which they now enact under our very eyes.

This holds especially true in respect to their social and political life. For if we do not know what was the material culture of the Nambikuara forty years ago (they were discovered only in 1907), we do know that their numbers became tremendously reduced after their contact with white civilization. General (then Colonel) Candido Mariano da Silva Rondon, who discovered and studied them, first stated that their number was about 20,000. This was around 1915. I take this figure as greatly exaggerated, but even if reduced by one half, it considerably exceeds the present number which is hardly more than 2,000. Epidemics have taken care of the difference. What does this mean, from the point of view of our study? During the dry season, the Nambikuara live in nomadic bands, each one under the leadership of a chief, who, during the sedentary life of the rainy months, may be either a village chief or a person of position. General Rondon wrote that, at the time he was exploring the country, it was not rare to see bands averaging two or three hundred individuals. Now, sixty or seventy

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

621 people are seldom met together, the average size of the bands being twenty individuals, women and children included. This demographic collapse cannot possibly have taken place without affecting the structure of the band. But here, too, we do not need to concern ourselves 121 with such questions as the type of political organization in earlier times. It is probably more difficult to understand Nambikuara sociology now than it was thirty years ago. Perhaps, on the contrary, the much reduced Nambikuara band offers, better than in the past, a privileged field for a study in social anthropology. My contention is that, precisely on account of its extreme impoverishment, Nambikuara political structure lays bare some basic functions which may remain hidden in more complex and elaborate systems of government.

[361] Each year, at the end of the rainy season, that is, in April or in early May, the semi-permanent dwellings laid in the vicinity of the 621 gallery-forest where the gardens are cleared and tilled, are abandoned and the population splits into several bands formed on a free choice basis. Each band includes from two to about ten families usually tied by kinship. This may be misleading when a band is met, for one easily gets the impression that it is formed as an extensive family. It 604 does not take long to discover, however, that the kinship tie between [602] two families belonging to separate bands may be as close, and eventually closer, than between two families inside the same band. The [582] Nambikuara have a simple kinship system based on cross-cousin marriage and the subsequent dichotomy between "cross" and "parallel" in every generation. Therefore, all the men in one generation are either "brothers" or "brothers-in-law," and men and women are to one another either siblings (true or classificatory) or spouses (true or classificatory). Similarly, children are, in relation to the adults, either sons and daughters (true or classificatory) or nephews and nieces, which is the same as actual or potential children-in-law.[1] As a result, there is no great choice of terms to express kinship, and this explains why kinship inside the band may appear closer than it actually is, and kinship between people belonging to different bands more remote than shown 602 by genealogies. Furthermore, a bilateral cross-cousin marriage system functioning in a relatively small tribe must produce a progressive 621 narrowing, and even a multiplication, of the kinship ties between any two individuals. This is a supplementary reason preventing family

[1] C. Lévi-Strauss, "The Social Use of Kinship Terms among Brazilian Indians," American Anthropologist, 45 (3) 1943.

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

relationship from becoming really operative in the constitution of the band. It can be said that, inside the band as well as between the different bands which are the offspring of the same temporary village, everybody is everybody's kin, in pretty much the same fashion.

Why then the splitting-up process? Two different considerations must be brought forth to answer this question. From an economic point of view, the scarcity of wild food resources and the subsequent high square-mileage needed to feed one individual during the nomadic period make the division into small bands almost compulsory. The real question is not why there is a division but rather on what basis it takes place. I have said that this is done by free choice, but this freedom is not arbitrary. There are, in the initial group, several men acknowledged as leaders (who likely acquired this reputation from their behavior during the nomadic life) and who make the relatively stable nuclei around which the different aggregates center. The importance, as well as the permanence of the aggregate through successive years, depend largely upon the ability of each of these leaders to keep his rank and eventually to improve it. Thus, it may be said that leadership does not exist as a result of the band's needs, but, instead, that the band receives its shape, its size, and even its origin, from the potential leader who antedates it.

There is, however, a continuous function of leadership, although not permanently assumed by the same individual. Among the Nambikuara, chieftainship is not hereditary. When a chief grows old, or is taken ill, and when he does not feel able to fulfill his heavy duty any more, he himself designates his successor. "This one—this one will be the chief . . ." he says. It seems likely that this autocratic power to insure one's own succession is more apparent than real. We shall emphasize later on the small amount of authority enjoyed by the chief and, in this case as in many others, the final decision is probably preceded by a careful survey of public opinion, the designated heir being, at the same time, the one with the greater support from the members of the band. The appointment of the new chief is not only limited by the wishes or disapproval of the band; it needs also to correspond to the plans of the individual to be chosen. Not seldom, does the offer of leadership meet with a vehement refusal: "I don't want to be the chief." Then a new choice must be made. As a matter of fact, chieftainship does not seem to be coveted by many people, and the general attitude of the different chiefs I happened to know was less to brag about their

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

G22 importance and authority than to complain of their many duties and heavy responsibilities. What, then, are the privileges of the chief, and what are his obligations?

When, about 1560, the great French moralist of the sixteenth century, Montaigne, met in Rouen with three Brazilian Indians brought there by some navigator, he asked one of them what were the privileges of the chief (Montaigne said, "the King") in his country; and the native, himself a chief, answered: "To walk ahead on the warpath." Montaigne related this story in a famous chapter of the *Essays* where he wondered a great deal about this proud definition[6]; but it was a greater wonder to me when, almost four centuries later, putting the same question to my informants I was given the same answer. Civilised countries are certainly not accustomed to such constancy in the field of political philosophy! Striking as it may be, this answer is less significant than the name by which the chief is designated in the Nambikuara language. *Uilikande*, the native word for chief, seems to mean "the one who unites" or "the one who joins together." This etymology suggests that the native mind is fully conscious of this extremely important phenomenon which I have pointed out from the beginning, namely, that the leader appears as the cause of the group's willingness to aggregate rather than as the result of the need for a central authority felt by a group already constituted.

Personal prestige and the ability to inspire confidence are thus the foundations of leadership in Nambikuara society. As a matter of fact, both are necessary in the man who will become the guide of this adventurous experiment: the nomadic life of the dry season. For six or seven months, the chief will be entirely responsible for the management of his band. It is he who orders the start of the wandering period, selects the routes, chooses the stopping points and the duration of the stay at each of them, whether a few days or several weeks. He also orders and organizes the hunting, fishing, collecting and gathering expeditions, and determines the conduct of the band in relation to neighboring groups. When the band's chief is, at the same time, a village chief (taking the word village with the restricted meaning of semi-permanent dwelling for the rainy season), his duties do not stop there. He will determine the moment when, and the place where, the group will settle; he will also direct the gardening and decide what plants

[6] Michel de Montaigne. "Des Cannibales." Essais, Livre I, XXXI (End of the chapter).

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

are to be cultivated; and, generally speaking, he will organise the occupations according to the seasons' needs and possibilities. 622

These rather versatile duties, it should be pointed out from the start, are not facilitated by any fixed power or recognized authority. Consent is at the origin of leadership, and consent, too, furnishes the only measure of its legitimacy. Disorderly conduct (according to the native standards) and unwillingness to work on the part of one or two discontented individuals may seriously jeopardise the chief's program and the welfare of his small group. In this eventuality, however, the chief has no coercivitive power at his disposal. The eviction of the bad people can take place only in so far as the chief is able to make public feeling coincide with his own opinion. Thus, he must continuously display a skill belonging more to the politician trying to keep hold of his fluctuating majority than to an over-powering ruler. Furthermore, he does not only need to keep his group together. Although the band lives practically alone and by itself during the nomadic period, the existence of the other bands is not forgotten. It is not enough to do well; the chief must try—and his people count on him for that—to do better than the others. [627]

No social structure is weaker and more fragile than the Nambikuara band. If the chief's authority appears too exacting, if he keeps too many women for himself (I shall later analyse the special features of the chief's polygamy), or if he does not satisfactorily solve the food problem in times of scarcity, discontent will very likely appear. Then, individuals, or families, will separate from the group and join another band believed to be better managed. For instance, this band may get better fare from the discovery of new hunting or gathering emplacements; or it may have become richer in ornaments or implements, through trade with neighboring groups, or more powerful as a result of a successful war expedition. The day will come when the chief finds himself heading a group too small to face the problems of daily life, and to protect his women from the covetousness of other bands. In such cases, he will have no alternative but to give up his command and to rally, together with his last followers, a happier faction. Therefore, Nambikuara social structure appears continuously on the move. The bands take shape, then disorganise, they increase and they vanish. Within a few months, sometimes, their composition, number and distribution cannot be recognised. Political intrigues within the same band and conflicts between bands impose their rhythm upon these fluc- 621 622

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

[621] 622 tuations, and the ascent or decline of individuals and groups follow each other in a rather surprising manner.

How will the chief be able to overcome these difficulties? The first instrumental force of his power lies in his generosity. Generosity —an all important feature of chieftainship among most primitive peoples, especially in America—plays an outstanding part even on those crude cultural levels where worldly goods are limited to the most primitive weapons and tools, coarse ornaments made of feathers, shells and bones, and raw materials, such as lumps of rosin and wax, hanks of fiber and splinters of bamboo for arrow-making. There cannot be great economic distinctions between families each of which can pack [462] all of its belongings in the baskets carried along by the women during [558] the long travels of the dry season. But, although the chief does not seem to fare better, in this respect, than the others, he must always have at hand surpluses of food, tools, weapons, ornaments which, while being small indeed, acquire great value because of the scarcity which is the prevalent condition. When an individual, a family or the band itself needs or covets something, the chief is called upon to secure the desired article. Generosity is the quality, much speculated on, which is expected of a new chief. Generosity is the string constantly struck which makes the general consent to one's leadership sound clear or out of tune. There is little doubt that, in this respect, the chief's ability to give is exploited to the utmost. Band chiefs used to be my best informants, and, well aware of their difficult position, I liked to reward them liberally; but I seldom saw one of my many gifts remain in their hands for more than a few days. Each time I took leave of a band, after a few weeks or a few months, its members had time to become the happy hoarders of axes, knives, beads, and so on. As a rule, however, the chief was exactly as poor as at my first arrival. Everything he had received from me (and this was considerably more than the average) had already been squeezed out of him. This collective greediness not seldom drives the chief to an almost desperate position; then the refusal to give plays about the same part, in this primitive democracy, as the threat to resign followed by a vote of confidence in a modern parliament. When a chief reaches the point where he must say: "To give away is over! To be generous is over! Let another be generous in my place!", he must, indeed, be sure of his power and prestige, for his rule is undergoing its severest crisis.

Ingenuity is but the intellectual form of generosity. A great deal

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

of skill and initiative are the prerequisites of a good leader. It is he who makes the arrow-poison, although the preparation of *curare* among the Nambikuara is a purely profane activity surrounded by no ceremonial taboos or magic prescriptions. It is he, also, who makes the rubber ball used in the head-ball games which are played occasionally. The chief must be a good singer and dancer, a merrymaker always ready to cheer up the band and to brighten the dullness of daily life. This could easily lead to shamanism; and, in some cases, I have met with chiefs who were at the same time healers and trance addicts. Mystical life, however, is kept in the background among the Nambikuara, and, wherever they exist, magical functions are only secondary attributes of the leader. More often chieftainship and sorcery are divided between two different individuals. In this respect, there is a strong difference between the Nambikuara and their northwestern neighbors the Tupi-Kawahib among whom the chief is, first of all, a shaman, usually a psychotic addicted to dreams, visions, trances and impersonations.

But although they are oriented in a more positive direction, the Nambikuara chief's skill and ingenuity are none the less amazing. He must have a perfect knowledge of the territories haunted by his and other groups, be familiar with the hunting grounds, the location of fruit-bearing trees and the time of their ripening, have some idea of the itineraries followed by other bands, whether hostile or friendly. Therefore, he must travel more, and more quickly, than his people, have a good memory, and sometimes gamble his prestige on hazardous contacts with foreign and dangerous people. He is constantly engaged in some task of reconnoitering and exploring, and seems to flutter around his band rather than lead it.

Except for one or two men without actual power, but eager to cooperate and to receive occasional rewards, the passivity of the band makes a strong contrast with its dynamic leader. It seems as if the band, having relinquished certain advantages to the chief, were in exchange relying entirely upon him for its interests and safety. I received a particularly striking demonstration of this under rather strange circumstances. After several weeks' discussion, I had obtained from a chief the favor of taking me, together with a few companions and some animals loaded with presents, to the semi-permanent dwellings of his band which were uninhabited at that time. This was a chance for me to penetrate more deeply into the unexplored Nambikuara territory

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

622 and to meet groups too shy to venture forth on the outer fringe. The native band and my own group set out together on a journey supposed to be short; but, because of the animals I had taken, the chief had decided that the usual route through a dense forest could not be used. He led us through the open country, lost his way several times, and we did not reach our destination on the scheduled day. Supplies were exhausted and no game was in sight. The not unfamiliar prospect of a foodless day fell gloomily upon the natives. But, this time, it was the chief's responsibility. The whole project was his own, as well as the attempt to find an easier route. So, instead of trying to discover food, the hungry natives simply lay down in the shadow of the brush and waited for their leader to take them out of this most unpleasant situation. He did not wait or discuss; but, taking the incident as a matter of course, he simply left the camp accompanied by one of his wives. At the camp, the day was spent sleeping, gossiping and complaining. There was no lunch or dinner. But, late at dusk, the chief and his wife reappeared, both heavily laden with baskets filled to the [262] brim. They had hunted grasshoppers the entire day, and, although the expression "to eat grasshoppers" has approximately the same meaning in Nambikuara as the French *manger de la vache enragée*,[1] this food was enthusiastically received, shared and consumed, amidst restored good humor. The following morning, everybody armed himself or herself with a leafless twig and went grasshopper-hunting.

622 595 I have several times referred to the chief's wives. Polygamy, which is practically the chief's privilege, brings him a moral and sentimental reward for his heavy duties together with the practical means of fulfilling them. In the Nambikuara band, apart from rare exceptions, only the chief and the sorcerer (when these functions are divided between two individuals) may have several wives. The chief's polygamy, however, presents special features. It does not constitute a plural marriage but rather a monogamous marriage to which relations of a different nature are added. I have already mentioned the fact that cross-cousin marriage is the usual pattern among the Nambikuara. Another type of marriage also exists, between a man and a woman belonging to the generation following his own, either a wife's "daughter" (true or classificatory) or a sister's niece. Both forms are not uncommon in South America and, together or separately, they have been re-

[1] Closest English equivalent: "to have a rough time of it, to go through the mill."

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

corded among many tribes. Now, what do we find in the chief's case? There is first a monogamous marriage of the cross-cousin type, that is, where the wife belongs to the same generation as her husband. This first wife plays the same part as the monogamous wife in ordinary marriages. She follows the sexual pattern of the division of labor, taking care of the children, doing the cooking, and collecting and gathering wild food. To this marriage are added one or several unions, which, technically, are true marriages, but of a different type. Usually, the secondary wives belong to a younger generation. The first wife calls them daughters or nieces. Besides, they do not follow the sexual pattern of the division of labor, but share indifferently in men's or women's activities. At the camp, they disdain domestic tasks and remain idle, either playing with the children to whose generation they belong or flirting with their husband, while the first wife keeps busy with the food and the fire. On the contrary, when the chief leaves on an exploration, a hunt, or some other manly task, they will accompany him and bring him their moral and physical help. These somewhat "tomboy" girls, elected by the chief from among the prettiest and healthiest of the group, are to him rather "girl-friends" than spouses. They live on the basis of an amorous friendship which contrasts strongly with the more conjugal atmosphere of the first marriage.

This system exerts a tremendous influence upon the whole life of the group. The periodical withdrawal by the chief of young women from the regular cycle of marriages creates a permanent unbalance within the group, between the number of boys and girls of marriageable age. Young men are the chief victims of that situation and must either remain bachelors for several years or marry widows or old women discarded by their husbands. Thus, the right to plural marriage represents a concession of considerable importance made by the group to its leader. What does it mean from the latter's point of view? There is little doubt that access to young and pretty girls brings him a much appreciated gratification, not so much from the physical side (as the Nambikuara share in the quiet dispositions of most South American tribes), as from the psychological and sentimental one. But, above all, plural marriage, together with its distinctive features, constitutes the technical means and the functional device placed at the chief's disposal by the group to enable him to carry out his exacting duties. Left by himself, he could hardly do more than the others. His secondary wives, freed by their special status from the customary

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

622 595 182 liabilities of their sex, are his helpers, comforters and assistants. They are, at the same time, leadership's prize and instrument. Can it be said, from the native point of view, that the prize is worth the trouble? To answer that question, I shall now have to consider the problem from a broader angle, namely, what does this elementary social structure, the Nambikuara band, teach us about leadership, its basis and its function?

121 There is a first point which does not require great elaboration. Nambikuara data contribute, with many others, to destroy the belief originated by early anthropologists, and temporarily revived by psychoanalysis, that the primitive chief could find his prototype in a symbolical father, and that the simpler forms of the State could progressively have grown out of the family. We have found at the root of the crudest forms of chieftainship a decisive step, which introduced something entirely new in respect to biological relations—and this step consists of *consent*. Consent, we have seen, is at the same time the origin and the limit of leadership. Unilateral relations such as right of age, autocratic power, or others, may appear in groups having an already complex structure. In simple forms of social organization, such as the one I have tried to describe, they are inconceivable. Here, on the contrary, the relationship between the chief and the group can be seen as a perpetual process of arbitration where the chief's talents and authority on the one hand and the group's size, cohesion and willingness, on the other, constantly react on and influence each other. If I had the time, and if it were not so far removed from my topic, I would have liked to show what considerable support modern anthropological observations bring, in this respect, to the analysis of the eighteenth century social philosophers. I am well aware of the fact that Rousseau's "social contract," which is the step by which individuals resign their autonomy in favor of the General Will, is entirely different from the nearly contractual relations existing between the chief and his followers. It remains true, however, that Rousseau and his contemporaries displayed a keen sociological feeling when they understood that cultural attitudes and elements such as "contract" and "consent" are not the result of secondary processes, as claimed by their opponents; they are culture's raw materials, and it is impossible to conceive a political or social organization in which they would not already be present. If I understand correctly, the recent analysis, by modern American

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

anthropologists, of the state-growth significance of military societies among the Plains Indians leads to exactly the same conclusion.[6] 121

My second point is but an exemplification of the first: consent is the psychological basis of leadership, but in daily life it expresses itself in, and is measured by, a game of give-and-take played by the chief and his followers, and which brings forth, as a basic attribute of leadership, the notion of reciprocity. The chief has power, but he must be generous. He has duties, but he is entitled to several wives. Between him and the group, there is a perpetual balance of prestations, privileges, services and obligations. The notion of reciprocity, originated by Marcel Mauss, was brilliantly analysed by Malinowski in his "Crime and Custom in Savage Society." In respect to leadership, he says: "The claims of chief over commoners, husband over wife, parent over child and vice versa are not exercised arbitrarily and one-sidedly, but according to definite rules, and arranged into well-balanced chains of reciprocal services."[7] This statement needs somewhat to be completed. Malinowski is right when he points out that the chief-commoners' relationship, as every relationship in primitive society, is based on reciprocity. In the first case, however, the reciprocity is not of the same type as in the others. In any human society, whether primitive or civilized, two different cycles of reciprocity are constantly at work: first, the chain of individual prestations linking the isolated members of the group; and, next, a relation of reciprocity binding the group considered as group (not as a collection of individuals) and its ruler. In the case we have studied, this is well illustrated by the rules of marriage. Taken in its broadest sense, the incest prohibition means that everybody in the group is obliged to deliver his sister or daughter to an individual; and, conversely, is entitled to receive his wife from the latter (whether from the same man, as in exchange-marriage, or from a different one). Thus, a continuous chain of reciprocal prestations is directly or indirectly set up between all the collective or individual members of the group.[8] This may be called qualitative reciprocity; but incest prohibition also provides the basis for a quantita-

[6] R. H. Lowie. 1927. The Origin of the State: 79-107; New York. K. N. Llewellyn & E. A. Hoebel. 1941. The Cheyenne Way. Part II, ch. 5. University of Oklahoma Press.

[7] B. Malinowski. 1945. Crime and Custom in Savage Society: 46. New York. (Third Printing).

[8] See the late F. E. Williams' remarkable analysis in "Papuans of the Trans-Fly": 167-169. Clarendon Press. Oxford. 1936.

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

121 tive reciprocity. We may consider it as a "freezing" measure, which, while it forbids the appropriation of women who are at one's natural disposal, prepares the formulation of marriage rules allowing every man to get a wife. Therefore, a close relationship exists in a given society between the forbidden degrees and the extent to which polygamy is allowed. How does the preceding apply to the Nambikuara? If they had cross-cousin marriage associated exclusively with monogamy, there would be a perfectly simple system of reciprocity (from the individual's point of view) both qualitative and quantitative. This theoretical formula is, however, upset by the chief's privilege to polygamy. The withholding of the simpler rule, in favor of the chief, creates for each individual an element of insecurity which would otherwise not exist. Let us state this in other terms: the granting of polygamous privilege to the chief means that the group has exchanged *individual elements of security* resulting from the monogamous rule for *collective security* provided by leadership. Each man receives a wife from another man, but the chief receives several wives from the group. In exchange, he offers to guarantee against need and danger, not to the individuals whose sisters or daughters he marries; not to those who will be deprived of a spouse by his polygamous right; but to the group, taken as a whole. For it is the group, taken as a whole, which has withheld the common law in his favor. The preceding considerations may have some bearing upon the theory of plural marriage; but, most of all, they remind us that the interpretation of the State, conceived as a security system, recently revived by discussions about a national insurance policy (such as the Beveridge plan and others), is not a modern development. It is a return to the basic nature of social and political organization.

So much for the group's point of view on leadership. What about the chief's own attitude in relation to his function? What is his incentive in assuming duties of which I have given a not too favorable account? We saw that the Nambikuara band leader has a tiresome and exacting role; that he must exert himself without pause to maintain his position. What is more, if he does not constantly improve it, he runs the risk of losing what he has taken months or years to achieve. This explains why many men, as I have already said, shun leadership. But why do others accept and even seek it? It is always difficult to appraise psychological motives; and the task is almost impossible when a culture totally alien to our own is considered. I venture to say,

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

however, that the polygamous privilege, highly valued as it may be from the point of view of sexual gratification, sentimental appeal and social prestige, would not suffice to determine a leader's vocation. Plural marriage is but a technical prerequisite of chieftainship; its individual value can only be residual. There must be something more; and, going over the moral and psychological features of the Nambikuara chiefs I knew, and trying to hold on to those fugitive and irreplaceable glimpses at their intimate selves (of which no scientific approach may certify the accuracy, but which gain, from a deep feeling of friendship and human communication, some sort of intuitive value), I feel imperiously led to this answer: there are chiefs because there are, in any human group, men who, unlike most of their companions, enjoy prestige for its own sake, feel a strong appeal to responsibility, and to whom the burden of public affairs brings its own reward. These individual differences are certainly emphasized and "played up" by the different cultures, and to unequal degrees. But their clear-cut existence in a society as little competitive as the Nambikuara strongly suggests to my mind that their origin itself is not cultural. They are rather part of those psychological raw materials out of which any given culture is made. Men are not all alike; and, in primitive societies, believed by early anthropologists to be overwhelmed by the crushing power of custom, these individual differences are as keenly perceived and worked out as in our so-called "individualistic" civilization. |2|

It is remarkable how far the practical experience of colonial administrators has outgrown, in relation to the previous considerations, anthropologists' theoretical studies. During the past twenty years, Lowie's pessimistic appraisal of anthropological work in the field of political institutions[1] has certainly not lost its value. We have much to learn from the scientifically untrained who deal with native institutions. I shall not here record Lyautey's testimony without reservation: "In every society, there is a leading class born for leadership and without which nothing can be accomplished."[2] What may be true for the simpler structures cannot be considered equally valid when considering the complex ones, where the function of leadership does not manifest itself any more in a "pure" state. But let us listen to Eboué who passed away a few months ago. Himself a full-blooded negro, he

[1] At the beginning of Chapter XIII of "Primitive Society."
[2] Quoted in: Governor-General Felix Eboué's Memorandum on "Native Policy," issued on November 8,1943.

3: Lévi-Strauss E-5 (1938-1939) 1944
SP17 Nambicuara SP17

12/ wrote the following when he was Governor-General of French Equatorial Africa in special relation to those nomadic tribes which, as he put it, "live under a regime of organized anarchy." I quote: "Who is to be chief? I shall not answer, as was the custom in Athens, 'the best.' There is no best chief, there is just a chief;" and further; "the chief is not interchangeable . . . the chief pre-exists."[21] This is precisely what was suggested to us from the start of our analysis of Nambikuara society.

In conclusion, I submit that, when developing the study of political institutions, anthropologists will have to pay more and more attention to the idea of "natural leadership." I am well aware that this expression is almost contradictory. There is no possible form of leadership which does not receive its shape and specification inside of a given cultural context. But this expression can be taken as a borderline case, or as a limit—as say the mathematicians. While the limit can never be reached, simple social structures give us, in the order of their simplicity, an even closer approximation of it. In such studies, we may accordingly foresee a privileged field for close cooperative work between anthropology and individual psychology.

[21] *Ibid.*